

October 20, 2003

State Workers

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**Liz Dunbar,
deputy
secretary
of the
Department
of Social and
Health Services,
has worked for
the state agency
for 22 years.**

DSHS official loves job's capacity to change lives

Liz Dunbar sits behind an immense wooden desk that bears family pictures and a nameplate reading, "Quality begins with me."

Dunbar, deputy secretary of the Department of Social and Health Services, is a 22-year veteran of the agency that serves one in five Washingtonians -- 1.2 million people per year.

"I am very committed to the mission of DSHS," she said. "The work that we do is very important. It's very underappreciated."

Dunbar is second in line at the agency and oversees its infrastructure, making sure everything runs smoothly. She works closely with the budget, finance and information-technology departments, among others.

"I go to lots of meetings," she said with a laugh. She also visits local DSHS offices around the state.

"Liz knows the agency very well, and she is respected. She has earned her way through the organization," said longtime colleague Carol Felton, special assistant to Children's Administration.

Dunbar chairs management team meetings and is active in the employee-recognition program and employee newsletter.

"It's important to pay attention to supporting our employees," she said. "Our employees are our biggest resource. That's what makes this agency work."

Dunbar first got hooked into social service when she took a sociology class in high school.

"Helping people has always been what I want to do, and I'm lucky to have been able to do that in my career," she said.

Since her high school days, Dunbar has found herself in many social-service jobs.

"Most people who are good, work at being good. Liz works every day: looking, hearing, testing, re-testing. It's not some gift that fell into her lap," said Lyle Quasim, Pierce County Chief of Staff and former DSHS Secretary. Quasim has worked with Dunbar for 20 years.

In the 1980s, Dunbar worked in the Refugee Assistance Program helping find jobs for refugees, mostly from Southeast Asia.

"It was a very challenging time but a very exciting time," she said.

Dunbar works in an agency that often sees public scrutiny, dealing with complex social issues.

"People look at that one case where we might have made a mistake. They remember that, and not the thousand times we did it right," she said.

But the challenges never seem to faze Dunbar. "Liz is direct with people, and kind, but doesn't shirk really hard problems. She faces them head-on," Felton said.

Dunbar said she is accustomed to change. She worked in Economic Services, orchestrating Washington's huge shift in welfare policy under President Clinton.

In the early 1990s, Dunbar was chosen for the state Legislature's juvenile task force, a conglomeration of legislators, judges and social-service workers asked to review all laws regarding juvenile justice.

Dunbar also served as the diversity director of DSHS.

"I am very proud of DSHS and the work we have done in diversity," she said.

Dunbar has always been interested in diversity, she said, because of her family and ethnic background. Dunbar's father, an American Air Force pilot, met her mother in Japan when he was stationed there after World War II.

Because she is half-Japanese, Dunbar has always been interested in the Asian-American community.

"Growing up, I saw the challenges. My mother had friends who really struggled. We were helping women who were very isolated," she said.

Dunbar worked with the nonprofit organization Asian- American Alliance in Tacoma, addressing the bilingual and cultural differences that challenged Pierce County's Asian-American community.

"I felt a real responsibility to help them have equal access to services and equal opportunity to improve their lives," she said.

She also served as the director for the Commission on Asian Affairs.

And Dunbar's commitment to diversity doesn't stay at the office; she and her family have hosted a dozen exchange students from South America, Mexico and various countries in Europe. They currently host a 17-year-old French student.

The effort, she said, was primarily to teach her children an appreciation of different cultures.

"Being in a military family, I was exposed to a lot of cultures," she said. Growing up, Dunbar lived in Texas, New York, Newfoundland and Japan before settling in the Northwest.

She says she has been so successful only with the support of her husband, Mike, a financial planner, and her kids, Rob, 24, and Midori, 22.

"I juggled it because I have a husband who does an equal share," she said. "I really admire single moms."

"Liz has gotten to where she is because she has worked very diligently," Quasim said. "You don't wake up in the morning and just know how to do this."

Although her work often goes unrecognized, she has stayed with DSHS because she feels strongly about its ability to change people's lives.

"I could go work somewhere else, but it wouldn't be nearly as compelling," she said. "We're out there doing the right thing every day."